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# Celt

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# CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITY: A STUDY ON *THE RAINBOW TROOPS*

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**Abstract:** The notion of translatability is possibly done with the extent to which meaning can still be adequately conveyed across languages. For this to be feasible, meaning has to be understood not only in terms of what the source text contains, but also in terms of target audience and purpose of translation. In linguistic untranslatability, the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the language of the source language text. If the target language has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable. What appears to be a quite different problem arises, however, when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the source text, is completely absent in the culture of target language. As culture has something to do with the concept, source language texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable. An adaptation, then, is a procedure whereby the translator replaces a term with cultural connotations, where those connotations are restricted to readers of the original language text, with a term with corresponding cultural connotations that would be familiar to readers of the translated text. Translating such culturally untranslatable items entails profound knowledge on both source and target cultures. Most cases in this particular work are solved by keeping cultural terms in the source language text, with or without explanation. Ecological, social, and religious culture terms undergo the process most frequently.

**Key words:** cultural untranslatability, target culture, source language text, unequivalence

**Abstrak:** Penerjemahan dilakukan sepanjang pesan sebuah teks bisa disampaikan dalam bahasa lain dengan makna yang sama. Proses ini dimungkinkan jika makna dipahami tidak hanya dalam teks bahasa sumber, melainkan juga dalam kaitannya dengan pembaca sasaran dan tujuan penerjemahan itu sendiri. Kesulitan penerjemahan sangat berhubungan dengan sifat-sifat formal bahasa yang dipakai dalam teks sumber. Jika bahasa sasaran tidak memiliki sifat-sifat yang sama, teks tersebut (relatif) tidak bisa diterjemahkan. Masalah lainnya adalah jika ada sifat situasional dalam teks sumber yang sama sekali tidak terdapat dalam budaya bahasa sasaran. Namun, karena budaya terkait dengan konsep, teks bahasa sumber sangat mungkin diterjemahkan dengan makna yang kurang lebih sama. Oleh karena itu, perlu dilakukan proses adaptasi. Dalam proses ini penerjemah menggantikan istilah budaya yang hanya diketahui oleh pembaca teks bahasa sumber dengan istilah budaya yang serupa yang lebih dikenal oleh pembaca teks bahasa sasaran. Menerjemahkan teks seperti ini memerlukan pengetahuan mendalam mengenai budaya sumber dan budaya sasaran. Penerjemahan sebagian besar kasus dalam karya yang dianalisis dalam penelitian ini dilakukan dengan mempertahankan istilah budaya dalam teks bahasa sumber, dengan atau tanpa keterangan penjelas. Istilah yang paling sering mengalami proses tersebut adalah entitas yang terkait dengan ekologi, sosial dan keagamaan.

**Kata kunci:** penerjemahan, istilah budaya, budaya sasaran, teks bahasa sumber, ketidaksetaraan

## RATIONALE

One of the ways of cross-cultural communication to be possible is through translation. It may be perceived as a means of transferring message in a language (source language) into that of another language (target language). McGuire (1980, p. 2) mentioned translation involves the transfer of 'meaning' contained in one set of language signs into another set of language signs through competent use of the dictionary and grammar; the process involves a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria as well.

Sang and Zhang (2008) wrote that communication across languages and cultures is a markedly complex issue, and translation is more than just a careful linguistic transfer. It is a purposeful action designed to achieve the most effective result in the target group. Translating from a text in a language

to that in another is, however, not that easy. Sometime we face specific terms with no equivalence in the target language.

Translating from a text in a language to that in another is, however, not that easy. Sometime we face specific terms with no equivalence in the target language. The notion of translatability and untranslatability is not a clear-cut incongruity. Translation may be done with the extent to which meaning can still be adequately conveyed across languages. Source language texts are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable. What appears to be a quite different problem arises, however, when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the source language text, is completely absent in the culture of which the target language is a part (Catford, 1965, p. 93).

That is always the case, as no matter how good the translation, something always seems to be lost. Nolan (2010, p. 57) mentioned people from different culture use the language with different words and expression which sometime are not perfectly translated into one another. Here is the example: the language of desert people have more words referring to what other people call sand and the language of the Inuit people has many word for ice.

Hatim and Munday (2004, p. 15) perceived translatability as a relative notion, and it has to do with the extent to which meaning can still be adequately expressed across languages. This might be possible when meaning is understood in terms of such factors as communicative purpose, target audience and purpose of translation.

This paper primarily concerns on the cultural terms in *Laskar Pelangi*, a work by Andrea Hirata (2008), from which the English version is published in 2009. The focus of this paper is to find out what kinds of cultural terms used and what strategies applied by the translator to cope with those terms.

## TRANSLATABILITY AND UNTRANSLATABILITY

Dealing with untranslatable concepts, whether represented in words or phrases, is an avoidable problem when translating. Catford (1965, p. 93) proposed two types of untranslatability, which he terms linguistic and cultural. On the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the target language for a source language

item. Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the target language culture of a relevant situational feature for the source language text. He quotes the example of the different concepts of the term *bathroom* in an English, Finnish, or Japanese contexts, where both the object and the use made of that object are not at all alike. But Catford also claimed that more abstract lexical items such as the English term *home* or *democracy* cannot be described as untranslatable, and argues that the English phrases *I'm going home* can 'readily be provided with translation equivalence in most languages' whilst the term *democracy* is international. To serve as an example, the word *home* and *house* in English are different notions, but both possibly be translated as *rumah* in Indonesian.

#### A. Cultural untranslatability

Culture is a more general tendency rather than individual personality and it changes over time (Nida, 2001, p. 18-9) and is reflected by language (Hatim and Mason, 1989, p. 237). Culture is a group-based notion. As a relative concept, something acceptable in one group is not necessarily a good and respectable in the other groups. Newmark (1987, p. 94) defined culture as the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. It includes objects, processes, institutions, customs, ideas peculiar to one group of people.

As culture is related to a specific group of people and it is reflected in the language of the group, equivalence in languages is something relative consequently. Baker (2001, pp. 21-26) presented some common types of non-equivalence at word level. Those are culture-specific concept, lexicalization of the source language concept in the target language, the source language word which is semantically complex, the different distinctions in meaning between the source and target language, the lack of a superordinate in the target language, the lack of a specific term (hyponym) in the target language, differences in physical or interpersonal perspective, differences in expressive meaning, differences in form, differences in frequency and purpose of using specific forms, and the use of loan words in the source text.

Getting laid out the meaning associated with social distinction, I would like to go over the reason why the idea of cultural untranslatability is essential. The actual main cause refers to Nida (1964, p. 12) that the greatest interpretation does not feel like the translation. Naturalness is really a crucial requirement (Munday, 2001, p. 42).

Certainly, a translation frequently needs an excellent interpretation which displays 'naturalness', even though description associated with 'quality' differs based on the interpretation environment or even objective and purpose (Nord, 1997). The idea of cultural untranslatability is essential once the cultural distinction is excellent simply because, without having coping with this, translators cannot achieve 'naturalness' as well as express the actual source text's purpose.

In order to demonstrate the significance associated with cultural untranslatability, I've attracted upon linguistic items which consist of several phrases in order to signify particular cultural specificity within the wide sense. There are 2 causes of this particular: 1) connections between social specificity as well as 2) converting the socio-cultural item (Newmark, 1987, pp. 82-84). Converting the socio-cultural item doesnot include the social distinction.

In this paper, I'd like to go over below exactly what conditions a word is actually untranslatable, or even exactly what decides the actual event associated with cultural (un) translatability within the target culture. This is essential simply because, for example, the culturally incongruous interpretation can be utilized being suitable inside an interpretation in which the audience allows this.

The actual ambiguity within the indisputable fact that source text messaging tend to be pretty much untranslatable (Catford, 1965, p. 93). For this function, we presuppose that we now have a few problems associated with event associated with cultural untranslatability, as well as there is a determining element with regard to this kind of problems.

## **B. The problems of unequivalence**

Baker (2001) proposed the notion of unequivalence at various levels. At word level, culture-specific concept is the most common factor leading to untranslatability. The source language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept may relate to religious belief and social customs.

Aspects which may appear as culture-specific concept cover ecological culture, social culture, material culture, religious culture and linguistic culture (Nida and Taber, 1969). These words are examples in Indonesian to



represent those five aspects, which may not be easily found their equivalence in other languages: *pancuran*, *siraman*, *kendi*, and *maghrib*.

Some of those culture-specific concepts are not lexicalized in the target language. The source language word may express a concept which is known in the target culture but simply not lexicalized. The word *standar* (Indonesian) is preferable when translating English word *standard* which means ordinary.

Some cultures have words which are semantically complex. The word *siraman* means the ceremonial event in a Javanese (a traditional tribe in Indonesia) wedding a bride has to get through the day before the wedding, taking place in her parent's house, where she has to be bathed by seven people and closed with the dropping of *kendi* by the make-up artist.

The different distinctions in meaning between the source and target language may cause another problem. Indonesian people will find it difficult to translate English phrase going out in the rain unless the context is provided the detail. In Indonesian, we use different words when people are going out in the rain without knowing it before and with the knowledge that it is raining. The first we use *kehujanan* and the second is *hujan-hujan*.

The lacks of a superordinate and the lacks of a specific term (hyponym) in the target language also make the translator hard to find the correct words. Indonesian has *padi*, *gabah*, *beras*, and *nasi* but has no general term for them, while English uses *rice*.

Physical or interpersonal perspective may be considered important in one language than it is in another. Indonesian has some word for English word *bring*: *membawa*, *menjinjing*, *mencangklong*, *memanggul*, *menyunggi*, *menggendong*, etc.

Differences in expressive meaning, differences in form, differences in frequency and purpose of using specific forms are some other notions that cause problem in cultural translation. In Indonesian, the phrase *hujan lebat* is *heavy rain* in English. Indonesian people use *lebat* in the particular phrase (thick) to illustrate a heavy rain.

The use of loan word in the source language text may pose another problem. Loan word *chic* in English may lose its sense of sophistication in the target language. Indonesian may have the word *anggun* or *menawan*, but it does not reflect the actual meaning of *chic*.

Dealing with those cultural matters, a translator may have some strategies to use. The first strategy used by a translator is leaving the word in its original language and inserting an explanation (Nolan, 2010, p. 57-58). Others are using a more general word, more neutral word, cultural substitution, loan word with explanation, paraphrasing, using unrelated word, omission, illustration (Baker, 2001, pp. 26-42).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. About the novel

In this paper, some examples are taken from Indonesian best seller novel *Laskar Pelangi* (Hirata 2008), translated into English by Angie Kilbane under the title *The Rainbow Troops* (published in 2009). This particular work was first published in 2005, yet in this paper, I refer to the 23rd printed edition. It has now been adapted into motion picture and musical drama.

As a literary work, *Laskar Pelangi* is an oasis in Indonesian literary time, which was flooded by thousands of chicklit back at the time. Not only does it tell a story of a wonderful childhood, it also contains a unique, new way of telling a story. Set on the Indonesian island of Belitong, it conveys a sad tale with laughter and lightheartedness. It tells of oppressed, marginalized people protesting in admirably good humor, without swearing, violence, divisive political movement, and anyone to take up their cause. The vicissitudes of growing up are depicted brilliantly. The reader will be touched by an absurd yet pure first love, and one can't help but smile at the innocence of the children as they earnestly plan their futures. It also tackles serious issues, such as the right to education and corporate exploitation, while framing those sensitive issues within the tale of a beautiful childhood journey and friendship of ten country children.

*Laskar Pelangi* (*The Rainbow Troops*), set on Belitong Island, Indonesia, tells the story of a tight-knit group of hardship. Fabulously rich in natural resources, Belitong is also home to chronic poverty and educational discrimination. This amazing story tells a persistent young teacher and her tireless efforts to fight for her ten students' right to an education. Together, they take the reader on a journey through the beauty of childhood friendship, the inspiration of love, and the power of education. Both the teacher and the students' magnetic personalities and unflagging determination are sure to inspire.

This inspirational novel is the first book in *The Rainbow Troops Quartet*. *Sang Pemimpi* (*The Dreamer*), *Edensor*, and *Maryamah Karpov* are the other three books in the series.

The beautiful story of *Rainbow Troops* was adapted for the big screen in 2008. It has found success not only in Indonesia, but also worldwide, and received some awards, including:

- A showing at the Berlin International Film Festival (Panorama), 2009
- Golden Butterfly Award, 23rd International Children & Young Adults Film Festival, Iran, 2009
- 3rd Place Audience Award, 11th Udine Far East International Film, 2009
- SIGNIS Award, Hong Kong International Film Festival, 2009
- Best Film, Bandung Film Festival, 2009
- Best Film, Indonesian Film Festival, 2009
- Nomination for Best Film and Best Editor, Asian Film Awards, 2009
- Musical drama, 2011

## B. Unequivalences in both works

This paper presents data from both works (*Laskar Pelangi* and *The Rainbow Troops*) and categorizes them according to Baker (2001) about unequivalence. To begin with, let us have a review on Baker (2001) about unequivalence, especially in word-level. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are five aspects which may appear as culture-specific concept. It covers ecological culture, social culture, material culture, religious culture and linguistic culture. Observe the following examples.

(1a) *Permainan kuno nan legendaris itu disebut tarak.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 168)

(1b) Herein lay the appeal of the ancient and legendary game of *tarak*. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 132)

The word *tarak* in sentence (1a) is the example of ecological culture term. In the game of *tarak*, which is played mostly in the Belitong area, two rubber

fruits were stacked and then hit with the palm of the hand. Whichever fruit didn't break was the winner. It was a game that opened the rainy season, a warm up for the far more exciting games to come when the rain flooded down from the sky.

The translator keeps some more ecological words in the source language. There are words dealing with plants, which may not be found in the target language. Those words are *gayam* tree, *santigi* tree, *kupang* tree, *bintang* tree, *jengkol* beans, *rambutan* seed, *aren* fruit, *pinang hantu* tree, *medang* tree and *angsana* tree to name a few. There are also some words about animals in the area: *prigantil* birds, *pinang barik* snakes, *satam* stone, *manau* snakes, and *jalak kerbau* birds.

Social culture words are found in the work and here are some examples.

(2a) *Sembilan orang, baru sembilan orang Pamanda Guru, masih kurang satu.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 2)

(2b) Nine people, just nine people, *Pamanda Guru*, still short one. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 2)

The word *pamanda* is an example of social culture term. *Pamanda* is an addressing form for a man in the area. It is used to someone of a close relative, meaning *uncle*.

(3a) *Bau hangus yang kucium tadi ternyata adalah bau sandal cunghai, yakni sandal yang dibuat dari ban mobil, yang aus karena Lintang terlalu jauh mengayuh sepeda.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 11)

(3b) That burnt smell I noticed earlier was actually the smell of his *cunghai* sandals, made from car tires. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 11)

*Cunghai* is a specific term for rubber sandals, which is usually used by people of suburban area in Belitong.

(4a) *Bagi Lintang, tempat sekolah kami ini, adalah metropolitan yang harus ditempuh dengan sepeda sejak subuh.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 11)

- (4b) For Lintang, the city district of our school was like a metropolitan city, and to get there he had to begin his bicycle journey at *subuh*, early morning prayer, around four o'clock a.m. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 11-12)

*Subuh* is one of five compulsory prayers in Islam, considered the first prayers and done early in the morning before sunrise. The exact time for *subuh* may vary from time to time, but no later than 04.40 in the morning. There are some other religious culture terms: *maghrib*, *tasbih*, *kopiah*, *azan*, *zuhur*, *halal*, and *lebaran*.

- (5a) *Lebih mudah menyerahkannya pada tauke pasar pagi untuk jadi tukang parut atau pada juragan pantai untuk menjadi kuli kopra agar dapat membantu ekonomi keluarga.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 2)

- (5b) It would have been much easier to send *me* to work as a helper for a Chinese grocery stall owner at morning market, or to the coast to work as a coolie to help ease the family's financial burdens. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 2)

In sentences (5b), the word *me* is choosen to replace the pronoun *-nya* in the Indonesian version. The pronoun is a third person singular, but since the previous sentences are talking about the main character (me, first person point of view), it is a lot easier for readers to grab the meaning when the translator uses *me* instead of *him*.

One difference between two language is the difference in form for some lexical categories. Next is the use of loan words in the source text. See the following sentences.

- (6a) *Aichang, phok, kiaw, dan khaknai, seluruhnya adalah perangkat penambangan timah primitif yang sekarang dianggap temuan arkeologi, bukti bahwa nenek moyang mereka telah lama sekali berada di Pulau Belitong.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 35)
- (6b) Their terms for these techniques, *aichang*, *phok*, *kiaw*, and *khaknai*, are still spoken by Mayal tin prospectors to this day. Kilbane, 2009, p. 41)

### C. Strategies employed by the translator

As aforementioned, dealing with cultural untranslatability probably has to do with some strategies: translating by a more general words, more neutral/less expressive words, cultural substitution, loan word or loan word plus explanation, paraphrase using related words, paraphrasing unrelated words, omission, and illustration. Look at the following strategies the translator employs.

(7a) *Jumpai aku di acara sembahyang rebut.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 257)

(7b) Meet me at Chiong Ki Su. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 21)

In sentence (7b), the translator uses *Chiong Ki Su* for *sembahyang rebut*, a more general and widely-known term. This strategy is also applied to the following.

(8a) *Hari ini Pak Harfan mengenakan baju takwa yang dulu pasti berwarna hijau tapi kini warnanya pudar menjadi putih.*  
(Hirata, 2008, p. 21)

(8b) On this first day, Pak Harfan wore a *simple shirt* that at some point must have been green, but was now white.  
(Kilbane, 2009, p. 23)

In (8b) the translator uses *simple shirt* to replace *baju takwa*, which is a more specific kind of shirt. *Baju takwa* is a moslem shirt, usually with some embroidery on it and comes in many light colors. It might both short and long sleeved.

(9a) *N.A. Sahara Aulia Fadillah binti K.A. Muslim Ramdhani Fadillah, gadis kecil berkerudung itu, memang keras kepala luar biasa.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 14)

(9b) *Sahara* was extraordinary hard-headed. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 15)

In (9b), the translator omits some parts of the source text, leaving only the main word, *Sahara*.

Next strategy is using loan word or loan word plus explanation, as shown in the following sentences, though there is not enough explanation for some words.

- (10) Subhanallah, my goodness, Lintang, praise Allah's holiness, praise Allah's holiness. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 55)
- (11) I read books on the *angkot*, the public transportation minivan. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 434)

If I consider local language as a loan words, then the following sentences serve as examples of keeping loan words without explanation.

- (12a) *Kiak-kiak! A Miauw memanggil tak sabar, dan Bang Sad tergopoh-gopoh menghampirinya.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 201)
- (12b) *Kiak-kiak! A Miauw summoned his coolie, Bang Arsyad, telling him to come quickly.* (Kilbane, 2009, p. 164)

The translator also uses illustration and explanation to give information for the reader, as in the following sentences.

- (13a) *Lalu persis di bawah matahari tadi tertera huruf-huruf arab gundul yang nanti setelah kelas dua, setelah aku pandai membaca huruf arab, aku tahu bahwa tulisan itu berbunyi amar makruf nahi munkar artinya menyuruh kepada yang makruf dan mencegah dari yang mungkar. Itulah pedoman utama warga Muhamadiyah.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 19)
- (13b) I knew the sentence read amar makruf nahi munkar, meaning do what is good and prevent what is evil – the primary principle of Muhamadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia with more than 30 millions members. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 18-19)

#### D. Naturalness

This book is marvelously translated, however, it reads unnatural when it comes to the proper names. Some song titles are translated instead of given the explanation on their contents. Even the whole song is presented in English. Look at the followings.

- (14) A Kiong was singing *Berkibarlah Benderaku – May my Flag Flutter* – as if he were a drill sergeant . (Kilbane, 2009, p. 112)

- (15) After having been scolded by Bu Mus for always singing the song *Potong Bebek Angsa – Chop the Goose’s Neck* – this time I decided to progress a little with a new song: *Indonesia Tetap Merdeka*, or *Indonesia Forever Free* by C. Simanjuntak. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 113)

The name of a shop, the name of a radio station, and a poem below also undergo the unnecessary translation process.

- (16) *Sinar Harapan Shop – Ray of Hope Shop*, the one and only place that sold chalk in East Belitong, was very far away. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 160)
- (17) Lintang obtained knowledge from Pak Harfan’s book collection, and Mahar had artistic insight – plus he knew about music because he hung out with the local radio broadcasters from *Suara Pengejawantahan (The Voice of Manifestation)* AM. (Kilbane, 2009, p. 123)
- (18a) *Dengar anak muda, mana bisa kau hargai karya sastra bermutu, nanti jika Buya menulis lagi buku Si Kancil Anak Nakal Suka Mencuri Timun barulah buku itu cocok buatmu.* (Hirata, 2008, p. 76)
- (18b) May be if Buya writes a book called *The Bad Little Boy who Steals Cucumbers*, it would be more suitable for your literary tastes. Kilbane, 2009, p. 63)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Translating a source text is aimed to get the message across in the target language. Since meaning is contextual, some words which may seem to be untranslatable at first come to be something understandable with the little help from context.

Without having discovering as well as coping with the untranslatability, translators might neglect to express the actual naturalness as well as the actual source text’s accurate purpose. With respect to the idea associated with correctness towards the socio-cultural framework, nevertheless, a few translations may certainly end up being inappropriate in the target culture.



Converting this kind of culturally untranslatable products involves adequate understanding of the actual lifestyle and culture.

Cultural translation and its attendants quandaries – knowing when to explain something and when to just leave it as it – should be the main concern. It entails profound knowledge on both source and target cultures. Dealing with cultural untranslatability has to do with some strategies: translating by a more general words, more neutral/less expressive words, cultural substitution, loan word or loan word plus explanation, paraphrase using related words, paraphrasing unrelated words, omission, and illustration. Most cases in this particular work are solved by keeping cultural terms in the source language text, with or without explanation. Ecological, social, and religious culture terms undergo the process most frequently.

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